

Hocus-Pocus About Gasoline Quality

By Jack Anderson

Despite the TV hocus-pocus about gasoline performance, the big names in gasoline like Esso, American, Mobil and the rest give you no more happy motoring than the brand Xs that sell for five cents less a gallon.

Moreover, when you drive up to your Shell dealer, he may fill your auto with Gulf under a private exchange agreement between the two companies.

The big firms, without telling the motorist, also supply their gas to independents like Bay, Hudson and Savon who then sell it at up to five cents less a gallon than the firms' own "captive stations."

What the driver gets from the Man Who Wears the Star, for example, is a five-cent-a-gallon charge for an under the hood check, windshield wipe and the right to use a credit card. And some cut-rates now perform these same services.

For decades, the big oil companies have been spending billions to convince the bewildered motorist that one gas is peppier, cleaner or gives better mileage than the next.

The cost of the advertising, of course, is added to the motorists' bill.

Nor is the car owner the only victim.

The brand name station operator must pay the big oil companies up to six cents a

gallon more than the independents pay their wholesalers—sometimes for the same gasoline.

These gouges and outright fakes are a sampling of what the Senate Antitrust and Monopoly Subcommittee has turned up for its hearings July 20-22. Government officials chemists and even oil executives have been invited by chairman Philip Hart (D-Mich).

The Defense Department, which buys gas for all government agencies, has furnished Hart evidence that there is little difference among gasolines of the same octane.

Chemists have provided the subcommittee with information showing that additives such as Shell's TCP, however fancy it sounds, is really just a detergent to clean up the mess left by the lead which Shell uses to beef up the octane of the gas. Other firms have similarly glorified their anti-lead, anti-rust, anti-freeze and anti-vapor lock additives.

Hart has discovered hundreds of private gasoline exchange agreements among Esso, Mobil, American, Ashland, Standard (Ohio), Texaco, and others. They prove that Big Oil knows its gasolines' supposed individuality is mere salesmanship.

The private gas-swapping deals are purely for economy. In Baltimore, for example, gas trucks are barred from the Harbor Tunnel. The

drive around the harbor is expensive.

A supplier on the West bank, therefore, provides gas to his East bank competitor's stations on the West side of the harbor. The East bank competitor reciprocates. The saving is enormous and only the motorist is hoodwinked. Since both gasolines are about the same, even the motorist isn't really hurt, unless he takes to heart the half-time and between-innings huckstering about the differences in brand name gasolines.

Footnote: The gas companies admit they have exchange agreements for newly refined gasoline. But they say the additives make gasolines different. Chemists, however, say that while the additives may be chemically different, their effects are virtually the same.

Snooping at Picatinny

For Col. W. A. Walker, snooping is a hard habit to break.

Defense Secretary Melvin Laird has ordered military surveillance of civilians stopped, but the colonel is determined to protect Picatinny Arsenal, N.J., from subversion.

As Picatinny's commanding officer, Walker has called upon "all personnel" to notify the security office if they "become aware that any individual, organization or group is engaged in any activity which could threaten the national

security or disrupt government operations."

He defines this subversive "activity" as almost anything "from distribution of disruptive printed media to destruction of government equipment and facilities."

A suspicious fellow, Walker doesn't even trust Picatinny's "cleared and trusted employees." They might be pressed into doing the enemy's evil work, he warns darkly, because of "weaknesses in their character or personal habits or . . . serious financial difficulties."

"It is imperative," he exhorts, "that such weaknesses be reported to the security office." Indeed, he expects all personnel on the post to keep an eye on one another—a duty demanded of them by "the oath of office" they took to "support and defend the Constitution of the United States."

Walker's snoop order, which would appear to violate Laird's directive on the subject, is contained in a Dec. 1, 1970, memo that is still in effect at Picatinny.

The colonel, reached at his Picatinny command post, assured us his surveillance procedures are not "out of line" with Army policy. Collecting information is permissible, he told us; it's "what you do with the information" that makes the difference.